

May 1, 2020

To: Dr. Francisco Durán, Chief Equity Officer, Fairfax County Public Schools

From: Jane Miscavage, President  
Kara Jenkins, Vice President Outreach

Re: **Return to Learn: FCPS Parent<sup>1</sup> Views on Back to School**

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Dr. Durán, thank you for the opportunity to provide insight into parent/family questions, ideas and concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on “back to school” in the fall. We appreciate that FCPS values input from families and caregivers as it establishes workgroups for fall planning.

After meeting with you Monday, and wishing to get preliminary information to you by Friday, we opted to send a brief questionnaire to get a sense for parent sentiment. Realizing we did not have time to produce a survey instrument, nor the ability to make it available to a large and accurate representation of FCPS families, we sent a brief questionnaire through our PTA president network. Interested parents were given a mere 48 hours to participate, so that our volunteers had time to review and summarize responses.

The result: the questionnaire went viral and received more than 8,000 responses. Parents need to be heard and want to be part of the solution. Which leads to a call to action:

**FCCPTA urges FCPS to convene a Parent Council<sup>2</sup> to establish a timely information and feedback loop, comprising organizations that both represent various student demographics and have established communication networks into their communities.** A standing Council provides a reliable group of advisors to whom FCPS can turn for feedback when time and opportunity do not permit more widespread outreach such as surveys. Council members should represent pre-school, K-2, 3-6, middle and high school students. Given the fluidity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council should meet on a regular weekly schedule and include, but not be limited, to representatives from:

- ADAMS Center (All Dulles Area Muslim Society)
- Chinese American Citizens Alliance
- Communities of Trust
- EduFuturo
- Fairfax County Association of the Gifted (FCAG)
- Fairfax County Council PTA (FCCPTA)
- FCCPTA Military Families Committee

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document we use the word *parent* to represent parents, caregivers, heads of households and/or adults responsible for FCPS students’ education and well-being.

<sup>2</sup> Many FCPS teachers are parents of school-age children too. FCPS is already working with the Fairfax Education Association and Fairfax County Federation of Teachers but may choose to invite their representatives to voice concerns of teacher-parents.

- Fairfax County NAACP
- Fairfax County Special Education PTA (SEPTA)
- Fairfax County Successful Children and Youth Planning Team (SCYPT)
- FCPS Pride
- League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
- National Korean American Services & Education Consortium (NAKASEC)
- Voices of Vietnam

There is an urgent need for this Council to:

- **Restore trust and build confidence in FCPS leadership.** Parents continue to voice anger, frustration, angst and mistrust of FCPS leadership.
- **Speed information gathering.** Council members can help identify concerns and obstacles with potential education options.
- **Strengthen communication.** Until a comprehensive system-wide communication overhaul is performed, the Council members can help keep parents in the loop with regular updates and more information about the factors that will influence FCPS's options. When outside forces require sudden changes, an educated group of community leaders can help provide context to families.

We urge you to act immediately. Together we're living in a world of uncertainty. FCPS can help establish a level of certainty by creating for parents a formal two-way communication channel.

\* \* \*

What follows is a summary of the feedback to our questionnaire. We cast a wide net with a few open-ended questions as a way to identify common ideas, questions and concerns. As our volunteers are not survey professionals, nor people who could translate the questions into other languages spoken by FCPS families, we do not present this as a comprehensive or scientific gauge upon which to make decisions. What it *does* tell us is:

- Parents are tuned in like never before and need a way to be heard. There is passionate and wide-spread interest in sharing feedback.
- Parents want to be part of the decision-making and solution process. There is little patience for further surprises and disappointments.
- Parents are deeply aggravated. Our well-intentioned questionnaire provoked anger among some parents who were offended by the timeline, misunderstood this as an FCPS questionnaire, or wanted more time to make their views known. Confusion reigns.

We are happy to discuss this with you further.

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On April 27, 2020, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) requested the Fairfax County Council PTA (FCCPTA) to provide input on classroom instruction and distance learning for the 2020-2021 school year. The COVID-19 pandemic caused FCPS to suspend classroom instruction and shift to distance learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school academic year. Public health officials have warned that subsequent COVID-19 waves may require public school systems to continue distance learning for the 2020-2021 school year.

The FCCPTA solicited input from its membership through an online survey. Within a few days, the survey garnered over 8,200 responses. The survey revealed a broad consensus among parents on the appropriate course of action for the 2020-2021 school year.

### **Return to the Classroom:**

- More than 82% of respondents agree that students should not return to school for classroom instruction in Fall 2020 unless it is deemed safe by Virginia and Fairfax County Public Health Officials.
- FCCPTA asked respondents to share their thoughts on the preparation and management of school facilities for classroom instruction. Among thousands of written comments, the following themes emerged:
  - FCPS should adhere strictly to public health guidelines established by the State of Virginia and Fairfax County.
  - FCPS should be prepared to offer every student the option of distance learning, even if FCPS resumes classroom instruction. Every parent should be allowed to determine if it is safe and appropriate for their child (or children) to participate in classroom instruction (and risk exposure to COVID-19). In particular, FCPS should support distance learning for immunocompromised students.
  - FCPS should require social distancing and the use of masks by students and school personnel.
  - FCPS should institute mandatory vaccination once a COVID-19 vaccine is developed.
  - FCPS should deep clean school facilities after each school day.
  - FCPS should ensure bathrooms are restocked frequently with soap and hand sanitizer. Currently, the frequency of resupply is clearly inadequate.
  - FCPS should institute mandatory testing and contact tracing.
  - FCPS should be flexible with attendance policies and sick leave, so infected students and school personnel can self-quarantine for 14 days.
  - FCPS should immediately notify parents of any infections among students and school personnel.
  - FCPS should close particular schools (or sets of schools) based on local COVID-19 infection rates.

### **Distance Learning:**

- Approximately 95% of respondents agree that FCPS should be prepared to offer distance learning to all students (or particular groups, such as immunocompromised students) as necessary.
- FCCPTA asked respondents to share their thoughts on distance learning. Among the thousands of comments, the following themes emerged:
  - Respondents expressed overwhelming frustration with the existing approach to distance learning, describing it as “disaster,” “debacle,” “mess,” and a “nightmare.” The existing approach was characterized as inequitable to working parents who do not have the time or resources to supervise and support their children with distance learning. It was also characterized as inequitable to special education students who require greater support in accordance with their IEPs and 504 plans.
  - This summer, FCPS should map out the key challenges to distance learning, such as lack of computers, Internet access, and secure virtual classrooms. FCPS should develop and

communicate a clear plan for enacting distance learning during the 2020-2021 school year in the event that it becomes necessary.

- FCPS should apply best practices and lessons learned from other public school systems that did not experience the same problems with distance learning.
- FCPS should increase synchronous instructional time at all age levels from elementary school through high school.
- FCPS should utilize existing technology platforms (other than Blackboard, which is strongly opposed by respondents). This summer, FCPS should test its selected technology platforms to ensure they are robust enough to handle the necessary volume and traffic for our county, which is the 11th largest public school system in the country.
- FCPS should employ existing supplemental means of instructions, such as Khan Academy.
- FCPS should allow students to shift in the middle of the school year to online programs, such as the Virginia Virtual Academy.
- FCPS should reduce its dependence on parents to provide home schooling and simultaneously increase its support for parents. For example, FCPS should provide training to parents on distance learning tools and relevant subject matter (e.g., math strategies), and FCPS should provide answer keys for parents to use in connection with packets mailed to home.
- FCPS should provide greater training to teachers in online instruction and establish a standard approach and method for particular grades and subject matter.
- FCPS should provide all students, to include middle school and elementary school students, with the necessary electronic devices (such as laptops) and ensure all students have reliable Internet access.
- FCPS should establish a system to ensure accountability in instruction and participation, so progress (learning) can be tracked, work can be graded, and credit can be received for subject matter taught through distance learning.

#### **Alternate Approaches to Learning:**

- Approximately 73% of respondents agree that FCPS should consider alternative approaches to classroom instruction.
- FCCPTA asked respondents to share their thoughts on possible alternate approaches to classroom instruction. Among the thousands of comments, the following themes emerged:
  - FCPS should develop and publish a clear plan as soon as possible. Respondents expect FCPS to come up with a coherent and well-implemented solution to provide a world-class education to students for the duration of the pandemic. Whatever the plan, respondents want to know the plan as soon as possible, so they can make appropriate arrangements for their families. In addition, respondents want FCPS to follow the plan as written. Respondents expressed extreme frustration with FCPS for frequent, last-minute decisions and changes in direction that disrupt family and student schedules, derail or inhibit learning, and make it difficult for parents to fulfill their work obligations.
  - FCPS should resume classroom instruction if it can be provided safely in accordance with public health guidelines.

- FCPS should provide daily instruction (5 days per week), whether it is provided through classroom instruction or distance learning.
- If the COVID-19 pandemic requires consideration of alternatives to classroom instruction, FCPS should consider options such as reduced class sizes and school populations, frequent deep cleaning of school facilities, mandatory masks for students and school personnel, and mandatory and frequent hand washing.
- In particular, FCPS should consider dividing the school population in half. Under this approach, Group A will attend school in person on Monday and Wednesdays and receive online instruction on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Group B will attend school in person on Tuesdays and Thursdays and receive online instruction on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.
- If FCPS alternates days of classroom instruction, siblings should attend school on the same days.
- There should be no Saturday or weekend classes. Keep weekends for families.

### **Remediation for Disruptions to Learning during the 2019-2020 School Year:**

- FCCPTA asked respondents to share their thoughts on possible remediation for disruptions to learning during the 2019-2020 school year. Among the thousands of comments, the following themes emerged:
  - FCPS should revise the academic calendar to begin the 2020-2021 school year at least 2-3 weeks in advance of the scheduled start date. Respondents proposed that the additional instructional time be dedicated to intensive review for core classes and remediation/tutoring for students.
  - FCPS should request a waiver of state testing requirements for the 2020-2021 school year because it will be unusually difficult (and unusually stressful for students and schools at a time of severe threats to public health, including mental health) to achieve passing scores.
  - FCPS should consider a transition to a longer school year or year-round school, which would minimize the impact of future disruptions.
  - FCPS should offer free summer school to enable students to bridge the gap.

### **Summer School and Enrichment Activities:**

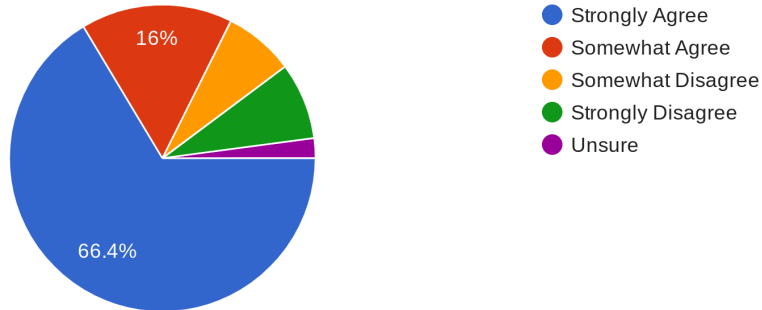
- In a typical year, a small but significant number of students will attend summer school and/or participate in FCPS enrichment activities during the summer.
- 12.3% of respondents have a student who attends summer school, and 17.8% of respondents have a student who participates in FCPS enrichment activities during the summer.
- FCCPTA asked respondents to provide any additional information that could help FCPS to plan for the next school year. Among the thousands of comments, the following themes emerged:
  - During the summer, FCPS should offer SACC, summer camps, and enrichment activities because working parents have few options for child care when school is out.
  - FCPS should offer free summer school through classroom instruction or distance learning.
  - The current approach to distance learning is incredibly inequitable with respect to special education students and at-risk students. FCPS should invest more time and resources to ensure these students receive the necessary education and support.
  - FCPS should expect students to exhibit more mental health distress or problems following the pandemic. FCPS should be prepared to address the mental health needs of all students. In

particular, FCPS should increase the number of school counselors, and it should consider additional measures to increase mental health services to students.

### **ADDENDUM: SURVEY RESULTS**

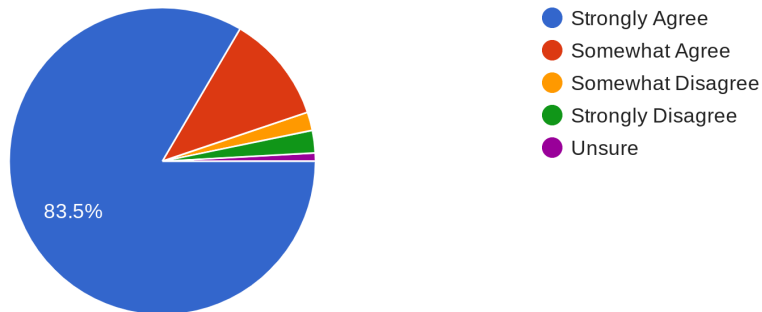
If the COVID-19 pandemic continues into Fall 2020, students should not return to school for in-person instruction unless it is deemed safe by Virginia and Fairfax County public health officials.

8,267 responses

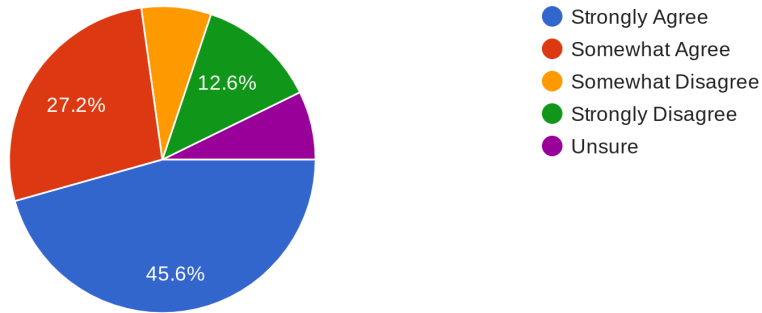


If the COVID-19 pandemic continues into Fall 2020, FCPS should be prepared to offer distance learning to all students (or particular groups of ...ch as immuno-compromised students) as necessary.

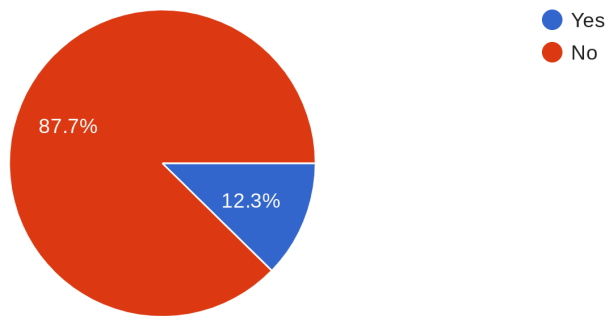
8,267 responses



FCPS should consider alternative approaches to in-person instruction (these may include the following options – which have not been proposed on odd) and/or holding school on weekends).  
8,267 responses



With Virginia's stay-at-home order through June 10, FCPS may need to consider alternatives to traditional summer school which starts in early July. If your student needs summer school, would your student need summer school?  
8,208 responses



If this were a typical summer, would your student need FCPS enrichment activities such as the arts program?

8,198 responses

